

Did the Air Force Lose the Public Opinion Battle Over Guard and Reserve Defense Cuts?  
32-9676 Chad Smith

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**Did the Air Force Lose the Public Opinion Battle Over Guard and  
Reserve Defense Cuts?**



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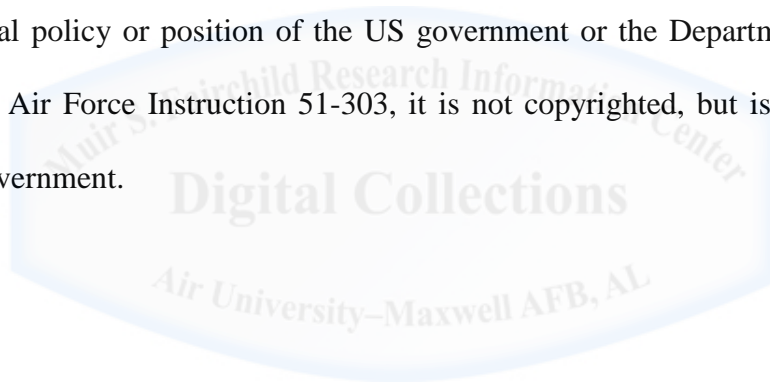
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The recent announcement to cut manpower in the Air National Guard and Air Force Reserve by 5,100 and 900 billets respectively is a tough decision that the United States Air Force leadership believes is necessary in order to maintain a force that balances fewer overall personnel with a more capable and ready organization.<sup>1</sup> However, many of the affected units and their representatives in Congress and the Senate disagree with the plan. In the weeks following the announcement, both sides used the media to try and convince the public that their proposed way forward is the best one. The opponents of the cuts are more effectively utilizing the media to draw attention to their cause and are outmaneuvering the administration in the war for public opinion.

The Air Force initially released and discussed the proposed cuts to the Air National Guard and Air Force Reserve in a press briefing at the Pentagon.<sup>2</sup> The Chief of Staff, General Schwartz, conducted a live interview attended by approximately thirty reporters.<sup>3</sup> During the briefing, General Schwartz methodically laid out the Air Force's plans to become a smaller, yet more flexible and capable force. Furthermore, he emphasized that in the future the Air Force will have to deal with constrained budgets which make the current force structure impossible to maintain. Also, the press release published by the Air Force Public Affairs Agency mentioned that there would be a reduction of approximately 10,000 people in the total force but he did not spell out how many of those would come from the Guard and Reserve. Finally, he discussed the need for a new round of the Base Closure and Realignment Commission in order to cut excess infrastructure.<sup>4</sup>

The use of internet and video media to release the news ensured that it reached a wide audience, however due to the limited amount of information actually released during the briefing it was exceedingly difficult to find a significant number of articles in non-Air Force publications

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or web sites that picked up the story. If the Air Force had released actual numbers and units identified for cuts in the initial briefing, the local media where the cuts were occurring would have been intensely interested in the news and would have devoted significant media coverage to the announcement as they later did when the affected units were finally identified. General Schwartz did an excellent job during the briefing providing the reasons why the cuts were necessary and how they would prevent a hollow force.<sup>5</sup> However, since the briefing only supplied sweeping generalities the majority of the media and average Americans were uninterested in the information. The Air Force missed an opportunity to get out the message to a large audience that the cuts are necessary and the Air Force had carefully and cautiously considered the implications the changes would have. Finally, when the Air Force identified the types of planes that were going to be cut but did not disclose what units would be affected it gave every Guard and Reserve organization operating those aircraft and the Congress members representing them, time to craft a response opposing the Air Force's decision. This enabled the opposition to eventually gain the initiative in the war for public opinion.

The Air Force spent the next several weeks defending the proposed reductions and eventually outlined the approximate numbers of personnel they were considering cutting. The Air Force had to counter criticism that the Guard and Reserve cuts were proportionally larger than the ones to the active duty forces and that the Guard and Reserve leadership were left out of the decision making process.<sup>6</sup> The Air Force did not do a very good job responding to the criticisms coming from the congress and failed to adequately address the accusations. The responses from the Air Force did not address the issue considered most pressing by the public which was the lost jobs but instead focused on global power projection and force balance.<sup>7</sup> However, in the same article the Guard leadership argues that only a very small part of the Guard

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was included in the discussion and that the Air Force intentionally left them out of the loop until the public release.<sup>8</sup> To the public this comes across as having something to hide and being overly authoritative in the decision making process. While the average service member understands that strategic level decisions are usually made by only the highest levels of leadership, the general population usually has a voice in what happens and expects the same to hold for the military. Furthermore, the opposing viewpoints from within the same branch of service hurt the Air Force message. If senior officers in the Guard and Reserve are willing to speak out against the proposed changes it carries weight with the public.

The next major media events conducted by the Air Force were the testimony by the Secretary of the Air Force and the Chief of Staff of the Air force before the House Armed Services Committee on 28 February and the release of the units and positions being cut on 6 March. In both of these events, the Air Force leadership portrayed the cuts as crucial to the continued defense of our country and explained that the cuts were necessary due to the fiscal constraints imposed on the Air Force by Congress.<sup>9</sup> The Air Force leadership promoted the increase in reserve component associations and that the Air Force must continue to “work closely in all deliberations and decisions affecting the total force.”<sup>10</sup> The announcement on 6 March included a press release and a link to the actual force structure announcement. The document was a 215 page slide show full of charts, graphs and pictures.<sup>11</sup> The accompanying press release restated the sound bites from the early messages about balancing force structure and avoiding a hollow force but it was difficult to find any mention of these themes in the local coverage of the proposed cuts. Only the cuts and how they would impact the local community made it onto the headlines. Once again, the Air Force failed to effectively communicate to the American public that the cuts were important for national defense and the continued strength of the Air Force as a

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whole. Instead, the public only saw coverage of how the Air Force was taking away jobs in the local area during one of the most difficult times in American history. The failure to provide any new information other than the identity of the units being cut and the traditional press briefing/slide show way the Air Force released the information ensured that they would remain on the defensive.

The opponents of the cuts had several distinct advantages over the Air Force and used them to great success, capitalizing on the perceived insensitivities and unfairness of the process as well as sympathetic hometown newspapers willing to promote the opposition's talking points in response to the Air Force leaders. Additionally, the Congressmen and women in the affected districts used their access to the press to question the Air Force's decisions and try to reverse the Service's decision.

An article by the WKBW news in Niagara Falls typified the local coverage of the proposed reductions. After a brief introduction of how many overall reductions were occurring in the Air Force, with no mention of the reasons behind the cuts except for "manpower impacts from the new Department of Defense Strategic Guidance and fiscal 2013 President's Budget,"<sup>12</sup> the article reported on the numbers of jobs that will be lost because of the changes. The article continues to discuss how the "long and proud 76 year history of the 107<sup>th</sup> Air National Guard...faces potential elimination."<sup>13</sup> The article then quotes the local Military Affairs Counsel as they question whether there was a "objective, transparent, and defensible process which led to this decision, and by what metrics was the 107<sup>th</sup> selected."<sup>14</sup> After calling into question the Air Force's credibility on the reasoning for the cuts the article tries to rally support for the local guardsmen. "The citizen soldiers of the 10<sup>th</sup> who are our friends and neighbors [sic] who are our friends and neighbors that have sacrificed on so many occasions to defend our country, deserve a

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better result than to fall victim to a budget balancing effort by the Pentagon.”<sup>15</sup> Next, the article applauds the efforts of the local Congressmen, Senators, and even the Governor who were fighting to save the unit. Finally, in one last effort to rally support the article quotes the Military Affairs Counsel plea for help, “we as a community must come together, as before, to protect the men and women of the Niagara Air Reserve Station, and as we (have) done in the past, we’ll find a way to succeed together.”<sup>16</sup> At the end of the article, the Air Force position is included but only in the very technical and dispassionate tone that contrasts poorly with the local flavor of the first part of the article. In this one article, which was representative of many of the articles researched, the Air Force came across as an oppressive bully destroying local jobs, while the heroic local unit and representatives were fighting valiantly to save the Guard from an unjust and unfair fate.

In addition to the news articles printed by the local papers the Air Force leadership suffered tremendous setbacks in the credibility of the recommendations when they were questioned by the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Defense. When asked by Rep. Kay Granger from Texas to provide a cost benefit analysis on the proposed movement of C-130s from her district to Montana, Secretary Donley and General Schwartz could not produce one.<sup>17</sup> Additionally, when questioned about the cancellation of the C-27 cargo aircraft the committee used General Schwartz’ previous testimony against him. Maryland Rep. Roscoe Bartlett asked, “Why, sir, do you believe three years later that the C-27J is no longer a multi-mission capable aircraft? Has there been any formal Air Force testing or analysis conducted that proves the C-27 is no longer a multi-mission aircraft?”<sup>18</sup> Finally, Senator Bob Casey directly challenged the Air Force leaders about cutting an “economic catalyst for southwestern Pennsylvania and an important part of our national defense that has no business being closed... all the while [the Air

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Force intends] to maintain at least 65 golf courses.”<sup>19</sup> Once again, the Air Force appeared to contradict itself, failed to produce solid evidence supporting the cost savings the cuts and relocations would bring, and appeared disconnected to the common man when it appears that maintaining golf courses is more important than protecting jobs and the country. While the average military member understands that golf course funds come from different sources than operational and maintenance funds the average public does not. The other points made by the Congressmen and women were valid and caused significant damage to the Air Force’s credibility in justifying the cuts.

In addition to the mainstream media, the forces opposed to making the Guard and Reserve cuts are utilizing non-traditional media as well. The Maryland Air National Guard’s Facebook page has multiple links on it that pertain to the proposed cuts.<sup>20</sup> Included are the story on the hearing detailed in the above paragraph where the Chief of Staff and Secretary came across poorly, a letter signed by the Governors of 49 states urging them to reconsider the cuts, and various other articles detailing the cuts and how they will affect the Maryland Air National Guard.<sup>21</sup> However, after a search of the Air Force’s Facebook page there was no mention of the proposed cuts.<sup>22</sup> This was a missed opportunity for the Air Force to try and communicate to a wider audience using non-traditional means.

After stiff opposition from the Congress and the Guard and Reserve leadership, the Air Force is appearing to back off on some of the proposed cuts. General Schwartz is “reconsidering” the proposed cuts to some of the Guard units he was questioned about during the Congressional hearings, specifically the C-130 unit that was being relocated without a cost benefit analysis.<sup>23</sup> This is a significant victory for the opposition and undermines the Air Force’s position. If the Air Force concedes on this unit, presumably most of the other units will also



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likely call into question the Air Force's position that all of the cuts were well thought out and necessary and then the entire Air Force plan begins to unravel.

Because the debate about the proposed cuts is ongoing, it is largely a matter of opinion as to whether or not the Air Force is effectively getting out the message about the proposed cuts and if the opposition is doing a better job at refuting the Air Force's cuts. However, due to several of the missteps listed above there is a growing body of evidence that the Air Force has completely mishandled the public relations piece of the cuts and is losing the war for public opinion.



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